



Debra Grant was one of 250 Virginians who attended a forum cosponsored by Virginia Organizing and other groups. The forum series, *Dismantling the New Jim Crow*, focuses on issues affecting people of color. January's forum discussed the "school to prison pipeline."



The Fredericksburg Chapter traveled to Richmond to meet with their legislators about school discipline, Medicaid expansion, closing juvenile prisons and reinvesting money in the community, non-partisan redistricting, and driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants.



Virginia Organizing leaders across Virginia participated in the 2016 General Assembly budget hearings in January. Pat Smith is pictured here asking legislators to include Medicaid expansion in the budget.

News From the Grassroots

Disrupting the 'School to Prison Pipeline' in Virginia Schools

Throughout the years, Virginia's schools have become hotbeds for student suspensions and referrals to law enforcement. In Spotsylvania County, residents have taken notice of this trend and are working to create change. The Fredericksburg Chapter of Virginia Organizing has adopted addressing the "school-to-prison-pipeline" as their local campaign.

Over the last year, Fredericksburg Chapter leaders have been meeting with local people who are directly affected by excessive school suspensions and/or referrals to law enforcement to hear their stories and develop an action plan. Many stories have stood out, like Reva English's story.

Reva's son attends school in Spotsylvania County. He has been enrolled in other school districts across Virginia without any issues, but when the family moved to Spotsylvania, that changed. English believes her son is being targeted.

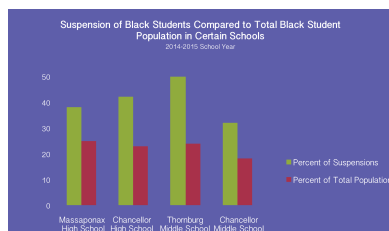
"The reason why this work is so important to me is because I don't believe in condemning my child for being an African-American child," said English. "The school-to-prison-pipeline campaign is about helping my child and other children keep their self-esteem intact while experiencing

some of the normal developmental issues that children experience—including being normal, talkative, and independent students and people. These issues are affecting our students, especially students of color."

English noted some concerning policies at her school, for example, that students must be silent some days at lunch.

"They are kids, they are going to talk," said English.

What English and other parents say is supported by the limited data available on school discipline in the county. In the 2014-2015 school year in Spotsylvania County, Black students made up 18 percent of the total school population, but 23 percent of the total suspensions. White students made up 60 percent of the total population and only accounted for 45 percent of total suspensions. The highest racial disparity in suspensions is found in four local schools as seen in the chart below.



The green bars show the percent of suspensions of Black students and the red

bars show the percentage of the total population of Black students in those schools. The disparity is stark and evident, especially because evidence shows that Black students do not commit more infractions than White students.

What causes this disparity? The data is not sufficient to make certain claims, but the Chapter did discover that 59 percent of suspensions in Spotsylvania County in the 2014-2015 school year were due to the subjective "related to behavior" category.

Similar to suspensions, referrals to law enforcement are also disproportionately affecting students of color and students with disabilities. Chapter leader Cliff Vaughn summed up the challenge: "The reality that there is a school-to-prison pipeline means we need to examine the differences in what is happening now versus what used to happen. There is now a school resource officer (a police officer) on site in schools and this resource officer is taking on responsibilities of administrators, which results in more severe punishments for students who are disrupting class, including being taken out of class and possibly arrested, instead of being handled at the school administrator level. The school resource officer is now enforcing the student code of conduct for school administrators. The biggest thing that bothers me about this is that school resource officers were placed in the schools to provide safety and security, not take over as arbiters of student behavior."

Real people. Real change.

Support the CFPB

Virginia Organizing is partnering with Americans for Financial Reform to organize in support of stronger regulations for predatory loans like payday loans, car title loans, and open-end credit loans. One way to endorse stronger regulations is to support the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). The CFPB is a federal government agency that helps protect consumers from bad financial practices and works to provide remedies for consumers who have been harmed by financial institutions.

This month, you can help! Read below for our newest newsletter feature, Action Steps, to learn more and help us limit predatory lending.

January Action Steps

Contact your Member of Congress and ask her/him to support a strong CFPB and stronger regulations on payday and title loan companies to protect consumers. You can find your Member of Congress at <http://www.house.gov/representatives/find/>.

Virginia Organizing is also participating in a photo petition and we need your help! Print our #StopTheDebtTrap sign at <http://bit.ly/stdtsign> or make your own sign to show your support of fair lending practices. Snap a photo of yourself or friends with the sign. Email the photo to amanda@virginia-organizing.org with your first name, last initial, and your city OR post on Instagram or Twitter and tag @VAOrganizing and #StopTheDebtTrap.

Ban the Box Work Continues

Virginia Organizing leaders in Suffolk supported efforts to ban the criminal history box from city job applications (known as "ban the box") and those efforts paid off!

The South Hampton Roads Chapter will continue to work to ban the box in Chesapeake. The Staunton/Augusta/Waynesboro Chapter is also working to ban the box in Staunton. Localities across the Commonwealth of Virginia have banned the box in the last year to increase access to jobs for individuals with felony convictions on their records.

Welcome New Organizers!

Virginia Organizing is growing again. We welcomed Meghan McNamara and Tuere East-Brown to our staff on January 1.



Tuere East-Brown began with Virginia Organizing as a volunteer. She joined Virginia Organizing as the Chesapeake/Suffolk Organizer in January 2016. "It is important we take a personal interest in building and strengthening our communities, and working together to build a better place for ourselves and our children," said Tuere.



Meghan McNamara worked on various social justice campaigns in Washington, D.C., Richmond, Chicago, and Hampton Roads prior to joining Virginia Organizing. Meghan has traditionally focused on immigrant and minority rights and economic equality. "I am excited to return to Virginia to organize for justice in the South Hampton Roads area and statewide," said Meghan.

Leader of the Month Ebony Guy



When Ebony Guy first moved to Danville, she was looking for community and a way to make a difference. Through Virginia Organizing, she has made real change in real people's lives!

Most recently, Ebony served as a leader in the Danville Chapter's #BlackLivesMatter discriminatory policing campaign. In 2014, following widespread violence and killings by police officers across the country, Ebony co-facilitated a series of community gatherings to plan a response. The campaign has resulted in improvements in accountability between law enforcement and the community, announced in December at a joint press conference with the Danville Police Department.

"The importance of this work will be its impact on future generations," said Ebony. "In Danville, Virginia Organizing's work with local law enforcement will have a positive effect on community relations for years to come."

According to Ebony, it is not only the victories that make Virginia Organizing special—it's also about the relationships.

"Above all, Virginia Organizing gave me a better sense of community. Getting to know people in my community and different aspects of my city is what I'm proud of."

Now Ebony wants to see more people get involved in making change.

"Virginia Organizing works on issues that will either affect you personally or someone you know," she said. "And those issues will affect people you may never meet."

Thank you, Ebony, for your great work in the community!

VIRGINIA ORGANIZING

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Local Chapters and Areas Served

Augusta/Staunton/Waynesboro
Charlottesville/Albemarle County
Danville
Harrisonburg/Rockingham County
Fredericksburg
Lee County
Lynchburg
Martinsville/Henry County
New River Valley
Roanoke
South Hampton Roads
Washington County
On Campus: UMW, VSU, CNU, UVA, E&H,
U of R, ODU, NSU, RU, TCC, VCU, JMU

News in Brief

- Virginia Organizing Chapters will be hosting more Women's Roundtable discussions in the coming months. Connect with your local organizer if you are a woman interested in being a part of these discussions. You can find your local organizer at <http://www.virginia-organizing.org/staff/>.
- Virginia Organizing is expanding our accessibility! The Staunton/Augusta/Waynesboro Chapter has American Sign Language interpreters at all meetings. If you need more accessible options to be a part of Virginia Organizing, please let your organizer know or contact our main office at 434-984-4655 ext. 222.
- The State Governing Board set an ambitious—but attainable—goal to raise \$500,000 this year from grassroots fundraising. When Virginia Organizing raises money from local people, we are able to focus on the issues important to you. If you'd like to contribute to this goal, consider becoming a monthly sustainer. You can fill out the form at http://bit.ly/vaorg_sustainer and follow the instructions to return to our Charlottesville office, or contact Sally Bastian at bastian@virginia-organizing.org or 434-984-4655 ext. 229. Thanks in advance for your consideration!